



**File Code:** 2450

**Date:** June 04, 2013

Dear Forest User,

The Powell Ranger District of the Clearwater National Forest is proposing forest management activities that would improve whitebark pine in the White Beaver project area. This project area encompasses approximately 15 acres along Beaver Ridge in the Storm Creek drainage portions of Sections 7, 8, 17 and 18, Township 37N, Range 16E, Idaho County, Idaho. The area is accessed by forest roads 368 and 369, as shown on the attached map.

### **Background**

Whitebark pine is a keystone species at high elevations for watershed stability and is an important source of food for many animal species because their large seeds have a high fat content. Red squirrels and Clark's nutcrackers usually harvest a large share of whitebark pine seeds. Bears raid squirrel caches that contain cones to get pine seeds, one of their favorite foods. Other mammals, large and small, and many species of birds also feed on whitebark pine seeds, or pine nuts, as they commonly are called. Because whitebark pine are long-lived and can grow large trunks, they provide valuable cavities for nesting squirrels, northern flickers, and mountain bluebirds.

Whitebark pine communities are rapidly declining throughout their range due to a combination of factors including fire exclusion, white pine blister rust, and mountain pine beetles. Whitebark pine is a fire-dependent species that is able to regenerate in harsh conditions following fires. Fire exclusion tends to favor other more shade tolerant species. Whitebark pine is often the first species to colonize areas, and often acts as a nurse tree that ameliorates sites so that other species can grow. In these mixed species stands, whitebark pine tends to be replaced by other species if natural competition is not kept in check by disturbances such as wildfires.

Whitebark pine is extremely susceptible to white pine blister rust, a fungal disease introduced from Europe that attacks all sizes of trees. In the northern Rocky Mountains, whitebark pine mortality in some areas exceeds 90%. Blister rust results in canopy losses in large trees which greatly reduces cone crops. Additionally, blister rust causes rapid mortality of younger trees.

The threat to whitebark pine by blister rust is currently complicated by widespread outbreaks of mountain pine beetle near the project area in Idaho and Montana. Mountain pine beetles have killed large numbers of whitebark pine in the northern Rocky Mountains. Increasing the health and vigor of whitebark pine could help fight off mountain pine beetle attacks which are currently affecting lodgepole pine in the vicinity.

Efforts to restore whitebark pine include removing competition around existing mature and immature whitebark pine, which causes increased growth, vigor, and survival. This removal of competing vegetation or "release" around mature whitebark pine could increase cone and seed production size and frequency. Seeds from these cones could then be widely dispersed by the Clark's nutcracker and thereby improve whitebark pine regeneration success.

The white bark pine stands on Beaver Ridge are an important part of the white bark pine restoration program on the Clearwater National Forest. This is the only operational cone collection area that is



relatively easy to access. So by maintaining these specific trees we are saving time and costs while helping to maintain a viable whitebark pine restoration program.

During the 2012 fire season the fires of the Powell Selway Bitterroot Wilderness Complex threatened this area which was ultimately saved at a high cost. By implementing the proposed management activities this area will become more resistant to fires, insects and disease in turn protecting this valuable resource area.

## **Objectives**

The objectives of the proposed White Beaver Project are as follows:

- Increase resilience of the existing white bark pine by thinning the adjacent lodge pole pine stands
- Create openings for additional planting of white bark pine.

## **Management Direction**

This proposal was developed to address management opportunities identified for vegetation resources within the project area. Existing conditions were compared with desired future conditions defined in the Forest Plan to identify 'management opportunities'.

The Clearwater Forest Plan identifies the project area as E1, Timber Management ground, and some US, Unsuitable ground, however after performing field review with the specialists from the Interdisciplinary team the entire project area meets the E1 management area criteria and will be managed as such.

**Management Area E1 Timber Management** - Provide optimum, sustained production of timber products in a cost-effective manner while protecting soil and water quality. The project area lies within Lynx Analysis unit 29 and currently meets the standard for suitable habitat as outlined under the Northern Rockies Lynx Management Direction.

## **Purpose and Need for the Proposal**

### ***Vegetation Improvement***

#### **Purpose:**

- Prevent/slow Mountain pine beetle infestations
- Restore whitebark pine in selected areas suited to their establishment and growth, using methods appropriate to the undeveloped character of its habitat.
- Release immature whitebark pine by removing the surrounding competing species
- Encourage natural regeneration around mature cone-producing whitebark pine.
- Protect existing whitebark pine plus trees and cone production trees.

**Need:** Whitebark pine cone collection and cone production trees represent significant time and financial investment that cannot easily be replaced. The areas proposed for treatment are dominated by homogenous stands of lodge pole pine of similar age located adjacent to the whitebark pine stands. Homogenous stands are less resilient to disturbances such as insects, disease and fire and these areas are slowly declining in health and vigor. There is a need to reduce the lodge pole pine component due to increased pine beetle mortality following the Powell SBW Complex fires. Reducing the lodgepole pine stand density would improve the resiliency of the whitebark pine to withstand the effects of fire and potential insects and disease outbreaks. This would also allow for the establishment of whitebark pine by reducing competition from surrounding species.

## ***Goods and Services***

### **Purpose:**

- To provide goods and services important to society and recover the economic value of dead and dying trees.

**Need:** Lodgepole pine stands dominate much of the project area. Mountain pine beetle infestations are contributing to increased mortality in the area. There is a need to capture the commercial value of the timber in infested stands before it is lost due to mortality and decay. Harvest of the timber would provide materials to local industries consistent with forest plan direction.

### **Proposed Actions:**

The White Beaver project area consists of three treatment areas totaling approximately 30 acres in mostly small diameter (6-9inch DBH) lodge pole pine stands at high risk of mountain pine beetle infestation resulting from the fires of 2012. Treatment activities include ground based sanitation harvest, and would retain standing and down woody material for long term soil nutrient and wildlife habitat. Post-harvest activities include slash treatment, pile burning and planting of white bark pine throughout all treated areas. At this time the White Beaver project would meet Category 14 of the Category Exclusion process (sanitation harvest of trees to control insects or disease not to exceed 250 acres).

### **Contact:**

We are interested in your comments about this proposal and invite you to send site-specific written comments to us for the White Beaver project. All submissions made pursuant to this notice may be made available for public inspection at times and places and in a manner convenient to the public business [7 CFR Part 1 Subpart B 1-27(c)]. Written comments should be submitted to Amy Larson, Central Zone Pre-sale Forester and team leader for this project, Powell Ranger Station, 192 Powell Road, Lolo MT 59847. The office business hours for those submitting hand-delivered comments are: 8:00 am to 4:30 pm (PST), Monday through Friday, excluding holidays. Oral comments must be provided during normal business hours via telephone (208) 926-6431 or in person. Electronic comments should be submitted in rich text format (.rtf) or Word (.doc) to [comments-northern-clearwater-powell@fs.fed.us](mailto:comments-northern-clearwater-powell@fs.fed.us). If you decide to comment please do so within 30 days of this notice and please include the following information: (1) your name, address, phone number, and organization represented, if any; (2) the title of the proposal you are commenting on; and (3) specific facts and concerns about this project that should be considered in reaching a decision. Thank you for your interest in this project. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

*/s/ Craig Trulock*

CRAIG TRULOCK  
District Ranger